PRINCETON SEMINARY #2
LOVE GOD AND DO WHAT YOU WILL
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Psalm 23
1 Corinthians 12:4-13

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:4)
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In the introduction to a wonderful biography, *Benjamin Franklin, An American Life*, author Walter Issacson says that over the years Franklin, one of the most remarkable Americans, was guided by one question: "How does one live a life that is useful, virtuous, worthy, moral and spiritually meaningful?" [p.4] Franklin lived to be 84 and never stopped asking that question and never stopped living fully.

I was particularly interested, of course, in Franklin's views of religion and whether religion had anything to do with his remarkable life. He was brought up in a properly pious Puritan home in Boston and his father even hoped he might study theology and be a minister. But Franklin was uncomfortable with the theological certainty and the ethical legalism of the traditional churches. The most influential thinkers of the age were Deists: they accepted the existence of God, thought God should be recognized and worshipped, but concluded that all in all God didn't have much to do with human life. Franklin became disenchanted with Deism also, and said "I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful." [p. 46]

Franklin thought that religion should be useful, he found himself attracted to a Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, particularly by the lively preaching of a young Assistant Minister, Samuel Hemphill. Hemphill came from Ireland in 1734 and was a great preacher, drawing large crowds, including Franklin. However, he was a bit of a free thinker, a little more free than his Presbytery could abide and soon found himself in trouble. Franklin supported him and defended him against his accusers.

But then it turned out that Hemphill was plagiarizing those lively sermons and soon left town. Franklin observed "I rather approved his giving us good sermons composed by others, than bad ones of his own manufacture; the latter was the practice of our common teachers." [p. 109] Franklin quit the Presbyterian congregation for good and although he continued to support the churches of Philadelphia and contributed his own money to all of them — including the first Synagogue in 1788, never joined a church again.

But he did continue to believe that God was involved in the matter of his life and that he was accountable to God for how he lived his life. Near the end of the book Issacson writes:

> "Franklin's belief that he could best serve God by serving his fellow man may strike some as mundane, but it was in truth a worthy creed that he deeply believed and faithfully followed. He was remarkably versatile in his service. He devised legislatures and lightning rods, lotteries and lending libraries. He sought practical ways to make stoves less smoky and commonwealths less corrupt. He organized neighborhood constabularies and international alliances. He combined two types of lenses to create bifocals and two concepts of representation to foster the nation's federal compromise."

Through it all, Franklin believed he was here on earth to serve God and that he could best do that by thoroughly devoting his prodigious energy and creativity and imagination to the common good and even though his biographers don't mention it, and academic historians wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole, I think Franklin had a fairly sophisticated Reformed notion of vocation — and that maybe he got it from listening to Samuel Hemphill's plagiarized Presbyterian sermons.

Union Seminary Professor and New Testament Scholar Walter Wink says that every human being has to answer two questions. The question for the first half of our lives, Wink says, is "What is the meaning of my life?" The question for the second half of your life and mine is: "With the time I have left, how can I make difference?"

It is a matter of supreme importance to every one of us wherever we are on our chronological trajectory: at the beginning, still sorting things out, with four or five decades and infinite possibilities ahead of you, or in the middle, with commitments and patterns set but with years of opportunity still ahead, or approaching retirement, or already retired, but with plenty of time and potential and your health and energy and passion and therefore potential and possibility in your future.

What should we do? Or, to put it in a religious context, "What does God want me to do? What is God's will or plan for my life? Does God have a plan for me? If so, why isn't God a little more upfront about it, a little more forthcoming with hints and clues, if not an operating manual for my life? It is the question of vocation; which we all have comes from a good Latin word meaning "to call." In its original sense — a vocation is a call from God.

In just two generations there has been a profound revolution in our culture around this issue. In my parents' generation decisions and opportunities were few and limited. Young men graduated from High School and went to

work for the Pennsylvania Railroad, got married and their wives became homemakers. Life was structured around that stable pattern for centuries. Going to work implied a life commitment, with some opportunity for advancement and promotion on a very limited basis, and the promise of a retirement after forty years. Within two generations that centuries-old pattern disappeared. The average American will have five or six different jobs in his or her lifetime, sometimes very different careers. Bankers quit and become farmers. Attorneys go back to graduate school and become teachers. Homemakers go to seminary and become ministers. Everybody seems to be looking for a new job. And early retirement leaves many people with good health, vigor and decades with which to do something.

The issue of vocation, has become more critical than ever.

The subject came up in the early Christian church in the Greek city of Corinth about 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul carried on a lively correspondence with the Christians in Corinth — who were a contentious, assertive, and highly competitive bunch, not unlike 21st Century Presbyterians. There was a huge argument going on in the Christian community in Corinth. The issue had to do with status and vocation. Who was more important than whom? Whose job in the community was most important, the preachers, the teachers, the people who visited the sick, prepared the meals, swept floors?

“There are many gifts” Paul wrote to them — God gives them all. God needs them all. None is more important than any other. Each is important, critical in fact. As a matter of fact the church, the community, Paul goes on to say, is like a body, and each part performs the function it is best suited to perform.

Embedded in one short paragraph in that 2000 year old letter are two radical ideas.

The first is that there is no caste system, no rank based on function. There are a variety of ways to serve God and be a Christian. No one way is more pleasing to God than the others. God needs good clergy; good preachers and pastors, but no more than God needs good musicians, housepainters, doctors, plumbers, school teachers, athletes and homemakers.

There is a radical egalitarianism in the New Testament with its roots in Jesus’ own ministry in which he simply refused to acknowledge the political, economic and religious caste system of his own society. What got him in consistent trouble with the privileged was his adamant refusal to play by their rules, to stay in bounds. He insisted on including all — inviting all to the table regardless of worldly condition, economic status, moral purity or religious orthodoxy. All were welcome and furthermore if you aspired to

influence and power within the community his strong suggestion was that you go to the end of the table and become the servant of others.

It was too radical for them and it still is for many of his followers. Almost as soon as it could the early church discarded his radical egalitarianism — which said that the only real authority is servanthood, in favor of the prevailing political model — an empire, a hierarchy, with God-given authority granted to the emperor or king who rules over everybody else. And in a few short centuries Jesus' counter-culture movement looked for all the world like every other power structure, with clear lines of top down authority and all the accouterments of empire-palaces, armies, real estate and the secular power to enforce its will.

Once a year we Presbyterians do something that expresses our intent to remember Jesus' radical new social model based on equality and service. I think we forget how radical it is. We ordain lay people to office in the church. Ordination generally is the rite, or the sacrament in Roman Catholicism, that confers status and authority to clergy. In our tradition the same ordination is conferred on clergy and laity — to service in the church. Pity the poor Presbyterian minister who thinks he or she has a lot of authority and is in charge of the church, not to mention the lives of the church members. We don't think much about it, but there are plenty of symbols of our commitment to radical egalitarianism — in our liturgy — and architecture even. I learned that lesson the hard way. The first time I presided at the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, it was on a hot summer Sunday morning in Williamsburg, Pennsylvania. The Presbytery that ordained me the Sunday before suggested that I might fill in down at Williamsburg, which was without a minister. It was communion Sunday, I had never done it before. It was a tiny church, maybe 30 people in the pews. And I made the mistake, when it came time for communion, to walk in front of the communion table with my back to the congregation for the prayers and the words of Institution — "This is my body … This is my blood." Afterward the Clerk — by the way — we're so egalitarian we call our highest officer the Clerk — the Clerk of the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, a rough farmer in a very tight blue serge suit said: "You did OK, but, sonny, never turn your back on a Presbyterian congregation. Never put yourself between the people and the Lord's Table. We want to see what you're doing up there."

The first radical idea is that there is no caste system here. the people are the church. The people are the ministers, John Calvin said. Their pastor is one they elect to preach the word to them and help them with the common ministry that belongs to them all.

The second radical idea is that in God's economy there is no unemployment, everyone has a job. God calls everyone, not just clergy: everyone has a

vocation. That comes as a surprise to many people. Somehow over the centuries we came to believe that God calls some people to become clergy, ministers, priests, nuns. That's what it meant to "have a vocation," but God leaves everyone else on their own when it comes to making vocational decisions. It comes as news to many people that many ministers never heard a voice in the night or were struck by lightning or had a vision instructing them to go to seminary. It comes as news that clergy struggle with vocational decisions as much as anybody else.

But Paul said: "To each is given the spirit for the common good." God has work for everybody to do. The common good: the life of the church; the broader life of the world depends on it.

Most of us are ministers. One of the secrets about us, in addition to the fact that most of us struggled with the decision to go to seminary, to seek ordination, to be a minister, is the fact that the question of our vocation recurs and is, in a very real sense a life-long question.

In his wonderful memoir, *Open Secrets, A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church,* Richard Lischer remembers his seminary graduation and how the years of preparation had opened a breach between the naïve faith he had brought with him into the system and the naïve secularism with which he was leaving "Without fully realizing it" Lischer says, "some of us were canceling the terms of our call — accepting assignments to small churches because our education had prepared us to do nothing else for which people would actually pay us a salary." After years of grooming he wasn't even sure he wanted to be a pastor.

And then he moved to his first small country church and fell head over heels in love and found his call — or recall — to use Jim Kay's good description, his vocation, confirmed over and over again, doing the sometimes mundane, sometimes breathtaking, tasks of ministry.

But the vocational question continued.

Later in the book Lischer asks for all of us: "Does the work of ministry really have the significance we attach to it? … The minister may drive 25 miles to a hospital in order to recite a thirty-second prayer and make the sign of the cross over a comatose parishioner. Who sees this act and calls it good?"

Who among us hasn't asked that question?

An hour it took me, after getting hopelessly lost in the cornfields of Central Ohio and the parishioner was stone deaf and her caretaker brought her to me in her wheel chair in the large waiting room in the hub of the nursing

home, with other elderly residents dozing in the naugahide chairs, staring at the Soap Opera blaring on the large television set. I was still new. I introduced myself — struggled to make a conversation. She couldn't hear a word and so I talked louder and louder — terribly self conscious — competing with *The Young and the Restless,* —now perspiring profusely. Sensing the futility of the exercise, desperately wanting not to be there, I asked her if I could pray. She didn't respond so I prayed, veritably shouted, bellowed my prayer, shook her hand and headed for the door, and as I was walking away she finally spoke in a loud, clear voice — "who was that man.?"

"Who sees this act and judges it to be good?"

I am going to presume to say that the one who sees this act and the thousands like it and validates it and sanctifies it, and makes it part of a kingdom which is coming — is the same one who claimed you in your baptism and called you and promises never to let you go.

Professor James Fowler has written helpfully:

> "Vocation is bigger than job or occupation or career. Vocation refers to the centering commitment and vision that shapes what our lives are really about."

Part of the way to know what your vocation is involves identifying your centering commitments. I was deeply moved to learn about the death of Pat Tillman. Tillman was a football player and a good one: a defensive back for the Arizona Cardinals.

After September 11, 2001, Pat Tillman started thinking about his life — and the world and his values. He started thinking about family members who had gone to war — thinking about his grandfather who had been at Pearl Harbor. In the middle of negotiating a $3.6 million contract, he told his agent: "I haven't done a damn thing as far as laying myself on the line like that." So he enlisted, walked away from millions of dollars and life as a professional athlete and joined the Army and became an Army Ranger and was sent to Afghanistan and died — we know by friendly fire — but he was there because he wanted to make a difference.

Part of knowing what your vocation is — is to identify and embrace your centering commitments. And part of it is identifying and acknowledging your gifts — what you are good at. Paul's assertion is stunning. God gives each one a gift for the common good. Everybody is good at something: something the community needs.

The final part of discovering or reclaiming your calling, your vocation — is to listen carefully — to your own heart and spirit. Sometimes we assume that God wants us to do something we'd rather not do; that having a vocation means self-sacrifice and personal deprivation. A friend of mine described the process as God dragging him, heels dug in, creating furrows across 1,000 miles of prairie, from Denver, job and home, to the front steps of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

But sometimes — maybe often, it is the very opposite. Maybe what we are supposed to do has something to do with our deepest love. I've always been intrigued by something St. Augustine said about vocation: "Love God and do what you will."

It does not necessarily mean changing jobs or doing anything differently. It may mean just that, of course, but it would not be a good thing if everybody in our congregation quit his or her job tomorrow and signed up to go to seminary — a dreadful thought, come to think of it! And I want respectfully to propose that it may not be a good idea to quit your ministry, and conclude that God really doesn't want you to be a minister every time you are unhappy, or things are going badly, or you're bored. It may mean recommitting to what we are doing, acknowledging that we are using our God given gifts to their fullest. It may mean a holy renewal of your vocation as pastor, preacher, parent, spouse, homemaker, grandparent, teacher, business executive, doctor, lawyer, volunteer, plumber, carpenter, clerk.

What it means for each of us, however we earn our living, is to know ourselves loved by God, claimed by God in our baptism, needed by God, gifted by God with skills, abilities, capacities, potential, that are uniquely ours, which the church needs, the community needs, the world needs, for the common good — and which our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to use passionately and energetically and lovingly.

"The place God calls you," Frederick Buechner once said, "is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Or St. Augustine, centuries before, "Love God, and do what you will." Thanks be to God. Amen.